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ABSTRACT

A study investigated the career advancement of three female superintendents from a Southern state who had completed surveys. These three female superintendents served as preliminary case-study participants and became the focus of the study concerning career advancement for women. One major finding of the survey was the importance of mentoring in the professional advancement of women. The study found that mentoring must be increasingly available for professional women. This need should be addressed on four fronts: (1) by institutions; (2) by gatekeepers to the superintendency; (3) by women in need of mentors; and (4) by those in positions to mentor. While no support was found for the notion that southern culture might significantly affect the career aspirations and achievements of women, further research into possible regional differences in the way women respond to discrimination might yield insight that could help to dispel damaging stereotypes. In addition, literature findings and the author's own career experience form a backdrop against which to understand female career advancement in public education. The six survey questions and a summary of responses by the three superintendents are supplied. Comments by the author to the questions are also given. (Contains 12 references.) (DFR)

Running head: CAREER ADVANCEMENT OF FEMALE SUPERINTENDENTS

Mastering the Maze through Mentoring: Career Advancement of Female Superintendents

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Paper presented at the meeting of the Mid-South Educational Research Association, Point Clear, Alabama, November 1999.

Mastering the Maze through Mentoring:

Career Advancement of Female Superintendents

Abstract

The purpose of this study was to investigate the career advancement of female superintendents. Three superintendents in a southern state were the focus of the study. Names and addresses of the public school superintendents were obtained from the state school board association, and those with traditionally female names were contacted via e-mail or fax. They were asked questions pertaining to career advancement, and of 20 surveys distributed, 3 completed surveys were returned. These three female superintendents have served as preliminary case study participants. One major finding was the importance of mentoring in the professional advancement of women. In addition, literature findings and the author's own career experience form a backdrop against which to understand female career advancement in public education. This discussion is organized to emphasize the purpose and scope of the study, assessments, findings, and recommendations.

Purpose and Scope: From Glass Ceilings to Glass Walls

Efforts to get through the glass house were always part of my childhood visits to the county fair. The glass house was actually a maze of walls made of glass, and my friends and I would stand in line and pay our quarters for the chance to walk through it. Success was to make it through the maze to the exit door without breaking anything (glass or oneself). Some of the walls were actually trick mirrors that reflected distorted images of us as we struggled to find alternate routes around the invisible walls. Especially those attempting it for the first time were foiled at every turn as they bumped into one glass barrier after another. Some people gave up in frustration and abandoned the effort, retracing their paths and leaving through the entrance door.

The proverbial "glass ceiling," a term coined by the Wall Street Journal to describe the invisible barriers that keep women from reaching executive and managerial positions (Witmer, 1995), is often experienced today in terms of walls instead of ceilings. Women today encounter a glass maze of walls--walls that can be circumvented, barriers that can be bypassed with strategic knowledge and skill--walls, nonetheless, that are unyielding, more dangerous because they are invisible--walls that invite women to give up and into which some crash, injuring themselves or their careers. Women who have made it to the top bureaucratic position in public education, the superintendency, have successfully maneuvered through a glass house of their own as they found circuitous routes of passage around unseen barriers. They often report that without guides who had previously mastered the maze, mentors concerned about their progress, they would not have made it. Female superintendents whose career advancement has been enabled by others have stories to tell that can assist both those needing mentors and those in positions to mentor.

In public education, a profession dominated by women, few women fill the superintendent's position. Men outnumber women in all of the prestigious professions in American society, but the male dominance of the public school superintendency is particularly striking. While 70% of all teachers are women (Chase & Bell, 1994), only 12% of the superintendents are female. Although the 12% figure represents dramatic improvement over the 7% in 1993 and the 1.2% in 1982 of superintendent positions filled by females, the current number still reflects extreme under-representation (Huang, 1998). The low percentage of women in the superintendency has been declared problematic by many state departments of education, by university departments of educational administration, and by some state legislatures (Chase & Bell, 1994). While women face systemic barriers in their attempts to achieve top positions, and gatekeepers such as board members and job search consultants need to recognize and address those barriers, individual women have developed successful strategies for detouring around the glass walls. The purpose of this study was to ask female superintendents to describe the people who assisted them professionally in significant ways, to discuss the obstacles they encountered in their rise to the superintendency, how they negotiated those obstacles, how personal contexts influenced their professional success, the role models who influenced them, and their perceptions of the influence of southern culture on their career aspirations and achievements.

Research Methods and Project Data: Collecting Perspectives on the Maze

After obtaining the names and addresses of the superintendents from the state school board association in a southern state, the superintendents with traditionally female names were contacted via e-mail or fax. They were asked to respond to the questions above, and 3 of the 20 surveys distributed were completed and returned. The low return rate could be due to the fact that the study was conducted during the month of May, one of the busiest and most stressful

times of the year for superintendents, to the reluctance of superintendents to answer such questions given the political nature of their job, to the method of correspondence (e-mail or fax), or to other unknown factors. At any rate, pertinent information was offered by the three preliminary case study participants. The author's career experience was also taken into account and, in conjunction with research literature, forms a backdrop for understanding the superintendents' career advancement. While the author, who has lived in the southern state in which the study was conducted for over half a century, originally suspected that there might be unique aspects to southern culture that would affect professional women's success, the data collected did not support that notion. Responses have been summarized and examined for similarities, themes, and defining factors.

Insert Table 1 about here

Assessment of Data: Voices from the Maze

Superintendents were first asked to tell about the people who helped them professionally in a significant way in their rise to the superintendency. All respondents mentioned professional colleagues such as former principals and superintendents. One subject emphasized that her help had come mainly from other females. One superintendent gave credit to two school board chairpersons, past and present, and other women superintendents within the state. A graduate school major professor was mentioned, and a college professor who worked with one of the respondents on a school improvement effort was cited as having been especially helpful. One superintendent gave special credit to her husband's willing assistance.

The second survey question asked the superintendents to describe any barriers they encountered as they advanced professionally. One subject listed three gender-based stereotypical statements--"Women can't make difficult decisions; women can't handle money; women can't have both a family and career"--to represent attitudes she encountered in the culture. Another subject, interestingly, replied that she did not encounter any barriers because she never really wanted to be a superintendent. She submitted her application for the position at the last minute only after learning that no qualified candidates had applied and because she simply "did not want to work for an ignoramus." The third superintendent responded that a former boss found her to be more useful as his assistant and, therefore, would not allow her to move into an upward track. She noted that men with lower degrees and less or less varied experience than she had were hired for positions she sought; she had to move to another system in order to progress.

In replying to the third question, which asked how they overcame or negotiated the barriers, one subject, explaining that she had learned a great deal from three former very competent superintendents, reported that she experienced no barriers. Another responded that she always made sure that her credentials were topnotch. "I gave 150%," she declared. Two respondents also alluded to working harder. "I overcame doubters by being smarter, tougher, and more politically savvy," stated one superintendent, and the other explained that she "cheerfully persevered" and continued to do her job better than men had done it.

The fourth question dealt with role models, and two women named one person who had served as an important role model. For one superintendent, that person was her father, a man who had been a successful business executive with a major railroad and a steel manufacturing company. The other subject listed a superintendent for whom she worked as a principal. The third respondent mentioned several other female superintendents within the state.

In describing how their personal circumstances influenced their success, one woman explained that her extremely supportive husband assisted in housekeeping, rearing children, professional development efforts, and in lending support for risk-taking while she moved up through the ranks in six different school systems. Another subject's personal context also involved a great deal of change. She mentioned that her family moved a great deal when she was a child, that she has lived outside the United States for a significant period of time, and is comfortable in almost any setting and in three languages. Upon graduating from high school, this subject had attended 12 different schools. Far from seeing such transience as a handicap, she credits her experiences in many different settings and cultures with helping her develop flexibility and confidence, critical traits for a superintendent. The third respondent explained that after the children grew up she felt free to accept a position away from her husband and spent only weekends with him for three years until he was able to find a suitable position in a nearby county.

The last question dealt with whether the superintendents felt that the influence of southern culture had affected their career aspirations and achievements. One subject simply answered, "No," while another explained that her own "culture" is not completely southern. She added that her perspectives on the world often clash with those of others in her school district but that she has learned to adapt and to respect their viewpoints. One superintendent recounted an incident in which she was asked by a board member during an interview whether she could "coon hunt." She expressed the belief that her gender kept her from receiving that position but that she came to be glad that she did not work in that county.

Findings: Maneuvering through the Maze

Responses from subjects in this study, literature findings, and conclusions drawn from the author's career experience converge to depict the following glass walls around which professional women must maneuver: a shortage of mentors, the need for mentoring from powerful men, sexism, the conflictual nature of ambition, self-limiting behavior, family concerns, gender stereotyping, and highly developed personal characteristics that include risk-taking.

Respondents in this study highlighted the importance of mentoring. They reported definite career benefits from informal mentoring provided by professors, professional colleagues, predecessors, and former supervisors. Without exception, the superintendents believed that their careers had been assisted by influential members of the profession, people who knew about the glass maze and who had, in many instances, previously negotiated it themselves. Lines like, "I had enjoyed good working relationships with three former well-qualified superintendents from whom I had learned a great deal," reflect the feelings of an "insider," a person who felt a part of the system, who was obviously respected and accepted, and who probably knew how to get things done, whom to call on for help, and what mattered in her particular culture. A professor in an influential position saw to it that one woman's resume survived the "screening" process. Political supporters reassured people who doubted that a female superintendent could handle the job. Professional colleagues urged patience, assuring aspirants that they could reach the superintendency if they persevered, and gave encouragement and advice.

The superintendents considered mentoring roles to have been performed by multiple people, but when asked about role models (Question 4), they listed only one or several. These findings are consistent with the literature that indicates both the importance of mentoring for

females but, at the same time, a shortage of role models. Women have had few role models to follow, especially in educational administration, and a woman often finds herself alone on any level other than that of elementary school principal (Biklen & Brannigan, 1980).

The nature of mentoring suggests why it is such a powerful force. The meaning of the word "mentor" has origins in Homer's The Odyssey, in which Odysseus entrusts the care of his young son, Telemachus, to his friend Mentor, who provides wise guidance for the troubled youth (English, 1999). To mentor has come to mean to guide, train, support, give one-on-one counseling to a younger, less experienced newcomer, especially in the ways of a profession or business (Witmer, 1995). The mentor usually guides the newcomer along career paths, opens doors to new opportunities, provides entry into certain social circles through connections and introductions, and often informally recommends the protégé for upcoming positions. Identification with the mentor indicates that the sponsor's resources and power are behind the one being mentored, and the power is reflected onto the junior member resulting in an unconscious identification often made between a person and his or her mentor (Farrell, 1990). Mentors help the newcomer understand the culture and informal networks and offer advice on issues that may be used to evaluate the mentees' qualifications (Witmer, 1995).

The importance of mentoring for women is strongly supported by the literature. Farrell (1990) summarizes over a dozen studies that suggest that professional women seeking career advancement see mentors as critically important. Mentoring is called "the single most important advantage an aspiring administrator can have" (Witmer, 1995, p. 187). In discussing the importance of mentoring, Rosabeth Moss Kanter (in Chase, 1995) observes that "if sponsors are important for the success of men in organizations, they seem absolutely essential for women" (p. 125). Mentoring is generally considered the most powerful factor to guarantee mobility within

the organization. Witmer (1995), in referring to research of the past 20 years, declares that "it is what is most needed by professional women...mentors are found to be critical to the advancement of women" (p. 187).

My own career experience supports the finding that mentors are essential for the advancement of professional women. Teachers and family members gave me opportunities to develop leadership abilities during my school years, but, lacking professional mentors when I entered the teaching profession, I stayed in the classroom only three years, returned to graduate school, and no longer considered the public schools as the focus of my career. As a young teacher, I had private aspirations to become a principal someday but was told by the personnel director who hired me to teach in a school led by a female principal that the county had only three of them [women principals] and was in the process of "phasing them out."
Very few of the women who were my contemporaries became administrators. If we had been afforded the opportunity to participate in leadership development activities with mentors who offered encouragement, advice, and recommendations, however, the story might have been quite different.

While one superintendent in this study emphasized the importance of female mentors, her experience is somewhat different from that of many reported in the literature. Farrell (1990) reported that female superintendents were aware of discrimination toward women in general, particularly on the part of other women. "Other females sometimes get quite competitive," one respondent stated, adding that "women are the worst enemies of other women" (p. 73).

Parker, a superintendent of an urban school district, credits her success to the continuous support she has received, not from other women, but from powerful men (Chase, 1995). Male mentors removed obstacles to upward mobility that Parker could not remove for herself, and

through their support she gained access to opportunities for increased responsibility and authority. "The men are the ones who can pivot you into the jobs" (p. 124) Parker explained, adding that understanding the fact of men's greater power and accepting men's support are crucial to women's success in the field (Chase, 1995). Parker also underscores the importance of mentors in her work history by expressions such as, "he just paved the way for me...people pushed me into all those positions...somebody was always pivoting me to the next place...I had great, great mentors" (Chase, 1995, p. 122-123). Those mentors were almost always powerful men, and knowing how to work with them helped Parker around the invisible walls that would have blocked her progress.

In discussing how they overcame barriers, several women pointed out the importance of responding to discriminatory sexism as well as powerful men without confrontation or aggressiveness. The superintendents in this study gave responses like "I cheerfully persevered" when asked how they overcame obstacles. Superintendent Parker (Chase, 1995) offers an especially vivid picture of a woman responding to discrimination gracefully, and she sees her ability to do so as important in her career advancement. When another woman offered to file a lawsuit on her behalf because of discriminatory practices to which she had been subjected, Parker refused to participate stating that "you can win the suit, but you're going to lose the war you know" (Chase, 1995, p. 135).

Parker implies that gender shaped her stance on how to respond to discriminatory treatment. She believes that it is important for women to be generous in the face of discrimination. She, therefore, responded with kindness and helpfulness toward the man who got the job for which she felt she was better qualified even though she felt deeply hurt. Legal action, she believes, is politically unwise and futile. Some would criticize her actions as calculated to

manipulate men through feminine wiles or charge that she simply has been socialized to please and defer to men. She did not, however, accept passively whatever came her way; on the contrary, she actively chose not to retaliate, voluntarily deciding to keep negative emotions in check. Her response was shaped by her conception of how women achieve success in a male-dominated occupation and her own self-concept as a woman who does not push. She believes that informal networks, especially mentoring relationships with powerful men, are more influential than the legal system.

The posture of humility, of refusing to seek overtly one's own advancement, is often depicted as a lack of aspiration. "If you show a lot of ambition toward men, they're threatened, so they're going to sure push you back," declares Parker (Chase, 1995, p. 139). Many women perceive that those who resist established relations of power are branded as troublemakers and that men like and are willing to mentor women who do not push, file suits, or get mixed up in other people's battles. Rhodes, another superintendent interviewed by Chase (1995), also rejects a confrontational stance toward the sexism she faces; instead, she assumes responsibility for doing something about the problem. By listening well, being inclusive and encouraging trust, she seeks to defuse men's tendencies to be threatened by female leaders.

Another female superintendent emphasized the importance of keeping negative emotions under control when encountering glass walls by relating an incident that occurred when she was interviewing for a principal's position. The male superintendent declared to her, "You will not get the job because I have picked the superman and I wanted it to be a super man" (Farrell, 1990, p. 75). He said this while lifting a big picture off his office wall and showing underneath a poster of superman. The female job candidate chose not to react because her husband, advising her that she was "going for the long haul," encouraged her simply to "roll over any sexist

comments" (Farrell, 1990, p. 75). These women carefully avoid any actions that threaten powerful men's claims to dominance.

Such a belief system might have caused one superintendent responding to this study to report that she had never aspired to the superintendency but just "did not want to work for an ignoramus." Research, indeed, indicates that there is a reticence among women in graduate educational administration classes to aspire to the superintendency (Herman & Herman, 1993). That lack of aspiration on the part of competent women could be the result of self-images that do not include promoting oneself for powerful positions. Just as the trick mirrors in the glass house reflect distortions, many women carry distorted pictures of what they can or should become--pictures limited by societal expectations or personal acceptance of one's "place."

My own career experience leads me to believe that many women function within the parameters of their restrictive and narrow socialization. When a woman embraces the concept of staying in her "place," she fails to recognize her capacity to lead. When, after five years of part-time teaching at the local college, I was told by the department chairman that "we won't be hiring any more wives full time," I was embarrassed that I had even asked. Instead, I should have felt outrage at this injustice. Limited access on the part of institutions for women in leadership and deeply ingrained notions of a "woman's role" lead to self-limiting behavior. While I originally thought that such self-effacing behavior might be more endemic to the south, the literature, as well as the responses from superintendents in this study, suggests that the tendency to constrain self-advancement career efforts is likely to be a characteristic of women regardless of the section of the country.

Other glass walls impeding women's progress come in the form of family concerns. Constraints on mobility affect women's career decisions according to references in the literature

and the respondents in this study. A superintendent in this study pointed out that she was not willing to take a job away from her husband until after the children grew up. My own experience coincides with this position. I freely chose child-rearing priorities over relocating for graduate studies or job possibilities, delaying my doctoral studies until child-rearing responsibilities were completed. Female superintendents interviewed by Farrell (1990) believed the superintendency to be the type of job one holds after family rearing is complete, not one which could be accomplished while trying to raise children. In addition, supportive husbands were cited as essential if the women were married. One respondent in this study credited her extremely supportive husband, who willingly performed child-rearing and housekeeping duties while encouraging his wife in her professional development and risk-taking. Total cooperation from the family and "complete spousal support" were named as key factors to successful careers and marriages by female superintendents (Farrell, 1990, p. 93).

Women seem to negotiate the glass wall of gender stereotyping through diligence and dedication. Common stereotypes include ideas held by people who believe, for example, that women can not fill a job like the superintendency, that men are easier to work with than women, that women can't or won't give the commitment to the job that top administrative positions require, or that men see and generate big ideas while women are better at following directions and doing detail work (Carroll, 1972). The perception that women are not tough enough to handle the political environment or the discipline problems of a high school remains strong (Herman & Herman, 1993). All respondents in this study reported running into such stereotypes. The woman who was asked by a board member in an interview if she could "coon hunt" felt the comment to be an obvious reference to her exclusion from the "good old boy network." Women seem to feel a compulsion to work harder and perform better because of these stereotypes.

All the superintendents in this study referred to overcoming gender stereotypes by "being smarter, tougher, and more politically savvy," or by giving 150%, making sure credentials were superior, and performing the job better than men had done it. "I think gender is a factor in employment," replied one woman, "a very definite factor... women have to be better, work harder, and have a better background to compete" (Farrell, 1990, p. 74). Women have reported that they felt they were expected to have more credentials and to meet higher standards when applying for administrative jobs (Goerss, 1977). The professional woman often feels that she has to prove herself not only better than many men but also better or different from what other women are thought to be like (Biklen & Brannigan, 1980). Women have even developed different definitions of power and more collaborative and inclusive approaches. Women, according to research conducted by Brunner (1994), generally think in terms of "power to," while men think of "power over."

Personal traits like confidence, thorough preparation, willingness to take risks, competence, and commitment to their work are evident in the responses of the women in this study. Especially interesting in this period of cataclysmic change is the common experience related to change for these subjects. They all report experiences of adapting to varied settings--cultures outside the United States, other languages, and different schools for one subject, working in six different school systems for another, and moving out of town for another in order to progress. I have personally changed jobs multiple times, often preferring to resign and work in different settings when confronted with unyielding glass walls. Experience with such fundamental change might provide the opportunity to develop essential coping skills necessary for a pressure-filled job like the superintendency or other top leadership positions.

Recommendations: Maps for the Maze

Maps for the glass maze through which female superintendents travel can be developed through greater emphasis on mentoring and further research efforts. Mentoring must be more available for professional women. The need should be addressed on four fronts--by institutions, by gatekeepers to the superintendency, by women in need of mentors, and by those in position to mentor. Institutions should establish formal mentoring programs for women, making explicit the kinds of training that men often experience informally, and they should also foster informal mentoring networks that are fully accessible to all interested women. Gatekeepers, such as school board members and professional job search consultants, should acknowledge the systemic barriers that confront women in order to increase these candidates' chances for success. Those aspiring to career advancement should actively seek mentors. One female teacher, upon hearing this suggestion, reported that she had returned to her school district, set up a meeting with her male principal and male superintendent, and said, "I want to become an administrator; will you help prepare me?" They responded by providing support and help for her to work toward her goal (Biklen & Brannigan, 1980, p. 248). And finally, women who are administrators should be accessible to women aspirants. Realizing that they are one of a small number of appropriate role models, female superintendents can perform life-changing opportunities for other women simply by being available to offer encouragement, advice, vision, and hope.

In addition to increased mentoring, additional research is also necessary. While no support was found for the author's notion that southern culture might significantly affect the career aspirations and achievements of women, further research into possible regional differences in the way women respond to discrimination might yield insight that could help to dispel damaging stereotypes. An extension of this study incorporating more direct questions pertaining to

mentoring could also yield additional useful information. Responses to the following questions could prove helpful to those structuring mentoring opportunities:

> "Did you have the benefit of any formal or structured mentoring programs during your rise to the superintendency? If so, what were the strengths or weaknesses of such experiences? How could school districts better enable professional women to assume positions of leadership within public education?"

These suggestions could reveal deeper insights into both the importance of mentoring and the impact of gender issues as related to regional cultural influences.

Challenges facing public education today call for superb leadership at every level and especially in the superintendent's office. Women with leadership potential must be encouraged, mentored, and empowered to exercise their influence. We cannot afford to continue to stifle human talent through gender stereotyping and failing to provide mentoring for professional women. We need to understand better how successful women educators have experienced career advancement--how they have mastered the maze of glass walls. Such understanding can spawn changes in the systems that inhibit growth for the good of our institutions, professional women, and ultimately the students we all serve.

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	Question 1: In your rise to the superintendency, tell about people who helped you professionally in a significant way.	Question 2: Describe any barriers you encountered.	Question 3: How did you overcome or negotiate those barriers?	Question 4: Who served as important role models for you?	Question 5: How did your own personal context, or circumstances, influence your success?	Question 6: Do you think the influence of southern culture affected your career aspirations and achievements? If so, how?
Supt. # 1	"good old girl network" other women supts. School Bd. Chair - present and former major professor in doctoral studies former supt. female colleagues	None - never aspired to the superintendency - applied at last minute when I heard there were no qualified (in my opinion) applicants because I did not want to work for an ignoramus	Many doubted that a woman could do the job. I enlisted political supporters to reassure doubters. Overcame doubts by being smarter, tougher, and more politically savvy	Father, successful business executive with a major railroad and a steel manufacturing company	Family moved a great deal. Attended 12 schools. Have lived outside the U.S.-- Learned new language and culture. Comfortable in 3 languages & any setting	Culture not completely southern. My perspectives often clash, but I've learned to adapt and respect others' viewpoints.
Supt. # 2	Supervisors, former principals, assistant superintendents, superintendents, and husband	Stereotypes such as "Women can't make difficult decisions; women can't handle money; women can't have both a family and career"	Gave 150% Made sure credentials were top-notch	A superintendent for whom I had worked as a principal	Very supportive husband...raising a family, housekeeping, professional development...he encouraged risks...6 different sch. systems	No
Supt. # 3	Former superintendent & a college professor who saw to it that my resume made it through screening to present to the board of education that hired me	Was of more use to the former supt. as his assistant so he would not allow me to move into an upward track...had to move to progress. Men with less exp. and lower degrees hired	Cheerfully persevered. Continued to do my job better than many men had done it.	Other female supts. within the state. They urged patience and encouraged me.	After children grew up, I took a job away from husband for 3 yrs. till he could find job in nearby county.	In one interview a Bd. member asked me if I could "coon hunt." I did not get the job but think I would have if I were not female.
Author	Several teachers, family members, roommate in grad. school, local political experts...none in the educational establishment	Messages of a "glass ceiling" for women. Cultural constraints on self-advancement efforts.	Left the educational establishment and found success as a professional in the larger community and business world	In terms of character and purpose, my parents. Nobody professionally (till doctoral studies)	Family priorities prevented my moving to other districts and earlier doctoral studies. Husband's income gave me freedom to try different career path.	Yes. Deeply ingrained notions of a "woman's role" have caused me to limit my own goals. Limited access on the part of institutions for women in leadership.

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